

WIDE-EYED FAITH
I Timothy 6:11-16
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The Reverend Donald Benedict, Director of the Chicago City Missionary Society, one of the first urban ministries in the nation, used to say that the primary function of the church in the city was to keep alive the rumor that there is a God. Now if your agenda calls for the establishing of God's Kingdom on earth, the business of keeping alive a rumor that He exists does not seem very ambitious. Yet Benedict identified a problem that is fundamental and critical: namely, that God has been systematically pushed out of contemporary life. He has no existence in the places where people live and move and have being. We seem to get along very well without Him.

That, by the way, is the basic difference between us and our forebearers, a fact which seems to be downplayed by historians. From the beginning of recorded time until recent years the reality of God was not only generally assumed but perceived in the natural world, acknowledged in common vocabulary and celebrated throughout life. Emerson wrote about the Calvinism of his youth "which hung like a benediction over New England, holding each man down to his place with the weight of the universe." (Sydney Mead, The Lively Experiment, p.94). Not even poets would propose that today.

The opinion polls keep telling us, of course, that ninety-five per cent of the people believe in God. But we can't really build anything on that. The popular God of American culture is so vague, so remote, so without presence in life that His existence is academic. We invoke His name at banquets, in political speeches and athletic victories: but not, of course, upon occasions that really matter. If God exists and has much to do with our lives, personally but also corporately which means politically, economically and socially, the man and woman in the street do not seem to be aware of the fact. Our culture is theistic, more or less, but atheistic in practical terms. The existence or nonexistence of God, after all, does not really seem to matter. Sam Keen writes: "A God who does not sanctify the everyday is dead, and belief in such a remote God is an intellectual or aesthetic luxury which is of no positive consequence...An unemployed God quickly exhausts his capital and becomes a dead God." (Apology for Wonder, p.90).

My assumption is that the problem is ours, not His. Further, that the responsibility is ours, not His, to remedy the situation. I continue to chuckle at Robert McAfee Brown's candid confession - "I remain unconvinced that my difficulty in believing in God says very much about God. It may say a great deal about me, but I cannot seriously entertain the notion that the reality of a God worthy of the name depends on how vividly I am able to conceive of him." (Theological Crossings, p.14).

It may be, that is to say, that the existence of God has been reduced to a fragile rumor because we have an impairment in our vision and hearing and sensing. Perhaps it's a matter of opening our eyes a bit, and ears and minds and hearts.

St. Paul was the first perons to think systematically about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was consumately rational and logical in laying out the practice of Christian discipleship. Our text this morning was a small portion of a letter he had written to his friend and colleague, Timothy. The letter is very practical: it deals with the offices of the Church, the duties of Christians: it offers bits of advice and counsel. But then, near the end, the reader encounters a radical

departure in method. Paul has been careful, pragmatic and logical. But suddenly he becomes lyrical and invokes a God who is full of mystery and majesty - "the only Sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen." (I Timothy 6:15-16). St. Paul, in the final analysis, predicated his faith on a God whose reality exceeds our ability to comprehend. He combined logic with a sense of wonder before the transcendent reality which we can never see fully. He would urge, I believe, a faith with a wide-eyed quality to it.

I propose that the difficulty we have in perceiving God is a product of our culture: that there is little room in our lives for the experience of awe or wonder. My assumption is that the experience of wonder or awe to which St. Paul seems to be pointing is essential to faith and that it is something we can and must learn. My assumption is that God may be perceived - if we learn how: if we sharpen our awareness a bit.

And the more I think about it and experience it in my own life the more I am convinced that simple busyness may be the most formidable barrier. We fill our days with so much activity that there is no time for anything but preparing for and getting to the next activity. The responsibility lies throughout our culture. I have concluded that it is not possible to keep up with one's children's school activities and hold down a job. But it is not all external: we invite it: we feel guilty if we are not doing something. And the casualty is awareness - sensitivity - the ability to see and hear what is really going on around us. Ernest Campbell suggests that we must cultivate the art of being tourists in life: the acute sensitivity to sights and sounds in the midst of which we live every day of our lives. He quotes a John Finley vignette that is one of my favorites: "To be seeing the world made new every morning, as if it were the morning of the first day, and then to make the most of it for the individual soul as if it were the last day." (Locked in a Room with Open Doors, p.66).

People who approach the door of death and then recover often testify that life is beautifully different: that they see everything in a new light: that the common becomes special. How sad that we must nearly die to learn how to see and hear.

We must sharpen our awareness of people. We believe that a human being is the crown of creation, that each individual bears the image of God. And when we take time to be aware we discover that indeed each person is special: that each has hopes and dreams and skills and something to give, that something of the mystery and majesty of the Creator is in each of His children. Trouble is we can't get past our obsession with functionality. I ran into a paragraph the late Joseph Haroutunian wrote this week on the subject: "...it becomes a habit to look at another man not as a fellow-man but according to his function and power in society - so much so that thinking men see the person as the sum of the roles he plays in the institutions of the city." (E. Campbell, *ibid.*, p.67). And almost as if by providence I encountered some very timely and recent documentation to punctuate the point: Columbus Monthly, to be exact, October 1977, the article which revealed how much money people make in our town. Listen to the introduction: "Jobs - Except for your family and genes, nothing affects you so personally and profoundly as your job. A job is your badge of identity. After people ask your name and where you come from, the next question most likely will be, 'What do you do?'" Joe Haroutunian, or St. Paul, for that matter, could not have made the point more eloquently. Religious faith sees more than how much we earn: for example - "When I look at they heavens, the moon and stars

which thou has made, what is man that thou art mindful of him?" - or - "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honor."

We need to cultivate a sharpened awareness to life, other people - and to ourselves. The waters of our own spirits run deeply: inside each of us is a resource of beliefs and hopes and feelings and loves which we need to affirm and which God can use to make Himself known. But it seems that life simply doesn't allow us to get in touch with ourselves: to become reacquainted with the person that is me. I've always been amused at the fact that my mind races when I'm mowing the lawn, that I compose sermons, write letters, plan projects and generally become rather alive intellectually on the business end of a power mower. I've concluded that it is the one time my internal self has the opportunity to be. I was delighted to learn that Albert Einstein once commented that his best ideas came while shaving in the morning. The prerequisite for self awareness is simply the opportunity to think freely - and some silence in which to do it. Rollo May suggests that many of us avoid silence because we would rather not discover what is inside, that we use the radio to fill up empty space so we don't have to listen to ourselves. He suggests that we are like the early settlers who beat pots and pans in the dark to frighten off the marauding animals they thought were there. And another commentator suggests that "It is difficult to avoid the impression that Western culture has formed a conspiracy against silence." (Sam Keen, To a Dancing God, p.44).

A friend of mine was studying in Europe and was focusing on the modern monastic movement in Italy. He visited several monasteries and entered fully into the discipline. On one occasion he was given some bread, cheese and wine and taken by a monk to a cave without explanation. When he inquired the monk told him it was time for a retreat and that he was to stay in the cave for twenty-four hours with God and his own self. The very thought of that makes most Americans terrified. My friend survived, but was fond of saying that it was both the worst and best experience in his life.

We need to cultivate awareness to ourselves and wonder at the mysteries each of us carries inside.

And finally, we need an awareness of the ultimacy and mystery which all the people in history before us experienced daily in the events of birth and death. In the name of medical science, or sophistication or something we have managed to isolate ourselves totally from any direct encounter with those experiences: the very experiences in which people have seen the mystery and reality of God.

Having been down this road a few times myself I found great wisdom in a paragraph by Langdon Gilkey, Theologian at the University of Chicago. He writes: "The serious impoverishment of the modern spirit...can be seen when we consider that this tremendous experience of the power and wonder of life, celebrated in all ancient cultures, is almost unavailable to modern men. In modern maternity hospitals, the woman is generally knocked out by anesthetics the moment labor begins, the husband is forced by the anxieties of the medical caste to remain outside, nervously poking butts in the father's crummy waiting room...This is not to denigrate the wonders of modern medicine in preserving both maternal and infant life... It is to bemoan the almost total absence of this experience of the depths, power, and grandeur of the life we seek to preserve." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.318-319).

In fairness it should be observed that this, at least, is changing: that fathers, more and more, are sharing the most magnificent - most awesome event in all of creation.

The delusion is that science - medical as well as the entire spectrum of physical science - has rendered God obsolete and impotent. However, it is usually the scientific layperson who thinks that way. There is perhaps no category of person more aware of the mystery of the created order than the scientist. A molecular biologist at Oxford said recently that there is a higher percentage of believers among scientists on campus than anywhere else in society. You and I are the ones who need our awareness sharpened: who need to learn to see the presence of God at the extremes of human life.

The sermon has been largely diagnostic. The reason is that in diagnosing, in recognizing the problem, we have already begun the remedy. Faith is wide-eyed. It begins with the ability to be amazed: to wonder at mystery and beauty around us, in other people, in ourselves. The philosophers have always known it. The Bible begins with it as the Psalmists look to the heavens and wonder at the Glory of God, or as the shepherds quake at the sight of a star, or as men and women tremble at an open tomb. It's a matter of being able to see and hear and sense.

In G.B.Shaw's St. Joan the archbishop asks: "How do you know you are right?"

Joan replies: "I always know. My voices.."

King Charles interrupts: "Oh your voices, your voices. Why don't they come to me? I am king, not you."

And Joan responds: "They do come to you: but you do not hear them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from your heart, and listened to the thrilling bells in the air after they stopped ringing you would hear the voices as well as I do."

(see E. Campbell, op,cit., p.71).

How to recover the mystery of God? How to find faith with its eyes and ears open? It is interesting that people who have come to Christian Faith later in life, or who have struggled and agonized over it before taking a stand, rarely have been persuaded by rational, logical argument. Almost without exception the experience of wonder has been at the heart of it: wonder at the person of Jesus Christ. Malcolm Muggeridge, British editor and man of letters has written a great deal about his recent conversion to Christianity. The basis was simply human awe at a story he had always known, but never really heard: the story of Jesus of Nazareth who was God's Incarnate Son.

Christian Faith, even for those of us who have professed it all our lives, begins deeply, at the point of our awareness. It is a matter of seeing God's presence beyond anything we can think or imagine: God's power and majesty wrapped up in the mystery of creation: in the profound beauty of other people - and deeply - in ourselves.

The best theology I know has been taught to me by my children. This summer I shared an experience with one of them to which I alluded in a Broadstreeter editorial. Our stay at the ocean coincided happily with the meteor showers and we spent several evenings watching the skies. He and I were on our backs, alone, watching quietly and he began to ask some inevitable questions about the stars. We talked about the fact that what we were seeing was light that left its point of origin millions of years ago: that the star itself may have long since burned out. It was a clear, moonless night and the heavens were as vast as I've ever seen them. He wanted to know about the expanding universe idea that they had discussed in school - the suggestion that galaxies are moving away from one another and then, of course, how is that possible? And won't they ever stop and what if they do? We tipped our hats to the idea of infinity and I thought the conversation was over but it wasn't.

"Daddy," he asked, "do you understand all that stuff?"

"No," I said, "I don't: not really."

After some more silence - "Does God?"

"Yes", I said, "I believe He does."

More silence, and then it came, straight, clear, true:

"Will I understand it when I die?"

"Yes," I said, "I believe you will."

And so will I, and so will all of us.

Amen.

O God, give us the wide-eyed wonder of a child. Break through our dry skepticism with a new way of seeing and hearing. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.